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# Is there such a thing as ‘white ignorance’ in British education?\*

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**Abstract:** I argue that political philosopher Charles W. Mills’ twin concepts of ‘the epistemology of ignorance’ and ‘white ignorance’ are useful tools for thinking through racial injustice in the British education system. While anti-racist work in British education has a long history, racism persists in British primary, secondary and tertiary education. For Mills, the production and reproduction of racism relies crucially on cognitive and epistemological processes that produce ignorance, and which promote various ways of ignoring the histories and legacies of European colonialism and imperialism, as well as the testimonies and scholarship of those who experience racism in their everyday lives. I survey these concepts within Mills’ work then marshal evidence in support of my claim that ‘the epistemology of ignorance’ and ‘white ignorance’ provide a useful framework for thinking through problems of racial injustice in British education.

**Keywords:** racism in education, white ignorance, Charles W. Mills, white curriculum, British imperialism, the Racial Contract.

## Introduction

The evidence that racism exists within British education is overwhelming. While the way that racism manifests may have changed over the past three generations, becoming more ‘subtle’ and ‘insidious’ (Vincent et al. 2013), students and teachers of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean descent—black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)

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students and teachers<sup>1</sup>—experience racism right across primary, secondary, and tertiary education.

In the summer of 2017, *Schools Week* reported a dramatic rise of over 50% in reports of racial hate crimes and subsequent arrests in schools between the years 2014-15 and 2016-17, based on freedom of information requests to the UK's 43 police forces. The same year, the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee published a report on 'prejudice-based bullying' of children and young people in schools which claimed that children from black, Asian and minority ethnic communities are far more likely to experience racist bullying than their peers. In 2016, *Show Racism the Red Card Wales* revealed that teachers in Wales reported a rise in racist name-calling against both students and staff, as well as a lack of confidence, training and support among teachers on how to deal with racist incidents, despite the fact that over 90% per cent of those surveyed strongly believed that anti-racist education should be incorporated into the curriculum (Lewis 2016). A common theme in the news coverage on these statistics was the claim these increases were part of an 'aftermath' or 'wake' of Brexit, whose campaigns and media coverage, founded on anti-immigration platforms, fuelled the normalisation of anti-immigrant views, speech and actions (Kroet 2016).

As well as racist name-calling, physical attacks or other forms of harassment, students who are racialised as non-white are likely to experience other forms of structural or 'institutional' racism. For example, recent UK government figures show that black

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<sup>1</sup> From here onwards I use the term 'black' to denote persons of African, Arab, Asian or Caribbean descent.

Caribbean students were three times more likely than white British students to be permanently excluded from education, and twice as likely to face a fixed period of exclusion (UK Cabinet Office 2017, 23). In November 2017, Ofsted announced that it was encouraging its school inspectors to question Muslim girls in primary schools wearing the hijab as a measure against the ‘sexualisation’ of young girls, sparking an outcry from over 100 teachers and faith leaders who signed an open letter protesting that such action would be institutionally racist (Halliday 2017). Consider too, two key policy initiatives by the UK Government introduced since 2010: first, the introduction of statutory duties under the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015—the so-called ‘Prevent’ duty—where teachers and university staff are required under law to monitor student populations for signs of radicalisation into terrorism with the outcome that BAME students, especially Muslim students, are subjected to heightened surveillance (UCU 2015); and second, the collection of schools census data in which parents of school-age children are being asked to provide documentary evidence of their child’s nationality and immigration status as part of the UK government’s agenda of creating a ‘hostile environment’ for immigrants (Schools ABC 2017).

Also in 2017, the Runnymede Trust and the National Association of Teachers report on the impact of racism on teachers in schools offered a similarly complex picture, with teachers from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds identifying ‘persistent discrimination, “microaggressions” and unfair and unequal treatment in their everyday teaching lives,’ including ‘being denied promotion without institutional clarity, cultural or racial stereotyping in terms of teaching roles... and a lack of support or firm action (e.g. zero tolerance) in relation to racist incidents against staff in school’ (p. 6).

Demographically, the teaching workforce remains a predominantly white workforce

(p.15), with significant disparities between the number of BAME students in primary schools (30.4%) and secondary schools (26.6%), the number of primary (6.5%) and secondary (9.6%) BAME classroom teachers, those in primary (5%) or secondary (6%) school senior leadership roles and primary (3.2%) or secondary (3.7%) BAME headteachers (p. 14).

Universities do not fare much better. Annual demographic monitoring by the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) reveals that for the period of 2015-16, BAME academics are similarly chronically under-represented in teaching posts in universities, representing only 9.1% of UK academic staff, and only 8% of those holding professorships in UK universities. This is despite BAME students making up 23% of those undertaking undergraduate degrees and 16.9% of those in postgraduate study. In the case of women from BAME backgrounds, they make up only 4.1% of academic staff and 1.7% of all professorships in UK universities. BAME academics are more likely than their white counterparts to be on casual or temporary contracts, and are much less likely to be represented in academic senior management roles (ECU 2017). Similarly, and despite evidence that BAME pupils overall outperform their white peers in schools (UK Cabinet Office, 2017), the ECU reports that white students are more likely than BAME students to achieve a 2:1 or a first in their undergraduate degrees, with 76.3% of white male students qualifying with a 2:1 or above compared to only half of black male students. BAME individuals are overrepresented within university admissions but under-represented in university teaching posts as well as being less likely than their white counterparts to either achieve top degree classifications or to continue to postgraduate study and on to become academics (ECU 2017).

The overall picture is clear: right across the educational pipeline, from primary to secondary to the university sector, black students and teachers experience systematic disadvantages compared to their white counterparts on top of the threat or presence of racist name-calling or assault.

Racism not only exists but endures in British education, despite decades of work of awareness-raising and policy-making aimed at promoting a ‘tolerant’ and ‘multicultural’ educational landscape. Why might this be? This paper seeks to argue that one way of making sense of the persistent existence of racism in British education—and indeed within Britain generally—is through the lens of the concept of ‘white ignorance’, introduced by Jamaican political philosopher, Charles W. Mills. ‘White ignorance’ identifies a phenomenon whereby contemporary and historical realities of racism are subject to the widespread, systematic and pernicious production of ignorance, as opposed to knowledge.

The paper will proceed as follows: in the first section, I offer an overview of the concept of ‘white ignorance’ and ‘the epistemology of ignorance’ in the context of Mills’ work, as a sort of preliminary conceptual map for those who might encounter it while thinking through questions relating to ‘race’ and education. In the next section, I consider a range of evidence which I argue shows that systematic, pervasive and pernicious production of ignorance on matters relating to racism and its aetiology exists in British schools and universities, i.e. that ‘white ignorance’ exists in the British education system.

### **What is White Ignorance?**

In this section, I set up Charles W. Mills’ account of ‘the epistemology of ignorance’ and its connected concept ‘white ignorance,’ situating these concepts in the context of

Mills' broader project of conceptualising the racialised political system of global white supremacy through social contract theory, ideology and social epistemology.

Mills works within the tradition of analytic political philosophy, and his work is framed within, and aimed at, the dominant concepts and theoretical frameworks of this tradition. Mills (2014) describes himself as using what Audre Lorde (1984) calls 'the master's tools' to provide a political philosophical analysis of race and racism which he argues is endemic to Western liberal democracies. Contrary to the view prevalent within liberalism, racism is not an anomaly within an otherwise just political system, but the norm (1997, 2003, 2007a, 2007b). Mills' descriptively-oriented, naturalised account traces how the late fifteenth-century onwards marked the start of several hundred years of European colonisation and imperialism in which the violent theft and expropriation of lands, bodies, labour and resources of black and brown people created wealth and prosperity for countries such as Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Italy, as well the British settler-colonies and ex-'Dominions' of the United States, Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. As these empires intersected the world, trading, fighting, annexing and ceding territories to one another, this gave rise to a global system in which the assumed superiority of phenotypically 'white' Europeans relied on the construction of a non-white 'Other' whose humanity was sufficiently undermined to be eradicated, subjugated, and exploited for white profit, even in the midst of the construction of a 'white' European identity as benevolently paternalistic and morally superior. Thus, Mills theorises the political system of what European scientists and philosophers came to reify in terms of 'race', where 'bodies and bloodlines' (Taylor 2013) became markers for membership and standing within moral, intellectual and political communities.

This global political system is what Mills calls ‘white supremacy’: ‘the system of domination by which white people have historically ruled over, and in certain important ways, continue to rule over nonwhite people’ (1997, pp.1-2). This is ‘the most important political system of recent global history,’ (pp.1-2) despite, on Mills’ reading, having been overlooked by mainstream and traditional political philosophy, ‘taken for granted’ (p.2). According to Mills, ‘white supremacy’ denotes:

[A] political mode of domination, with... special norms for allocating benefits and burdens, rights and duties; [with] its own ideology and an internal, at least semi-autonomous logic that influences law, culture and consciousness. (2003, p.98)

White supremacy thus denotes a global political system in which power, resources, opportunities, and liabilities are distributed within this structure on the basis of ‘race’. Mills (1998) follows radical black and colonial intellectuals, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and C. L. R. James in understanding

race in international terms, as a set of relations to be understood not merely locally... but as the global outcome of historic processes of European imperialism, settlement and colonialism. (p.126)

Race is thus understood as a ‘social construction’, a social not a biological category (Mills 1997, 1998, 2007a, 2015), and one whose history is inextricably tied to the operations of the European global imperial project. White supremacy is thus a political system that *racialises* persons, socially constructing them *into* race, specifically hierarchies of racialisation framed around white superiority and non-white inferiority. Mills (1997, 1998, 2007a, 2015) notes that naming this political system ‘white supremacy’ was common pre-World War II, after which the Allied fight against Hitler’s application of colonial and imperial inventions in Europe demanded the repudiation of



German racism from the vantage point of a white-washed, supposedly anti-racist position of moral superiority.

Mills argues that white supremacy names a racialised political system of domination that once existed and continues to exist (Mills 1997, 1998, 2003, 2015). Many would claim that the end of the period of formal or legal *de jure* racial discrimination and the start of nominal equality for all persons regardless of their race before the law, marked the end of white supremacy. Mills disagrees. He contends that white supremacy—much like other forms of domination and oppression, including those involving class and gender—is not solely constituted by one’s formal or juridico-legal status. White supremacy is a multi-dimensional phenomenon which operates in at least six areas: the economic, cultural, somatic (i.e. relating to one’s body or one’s embodiment), cognitive-evaluative (i.e., pertaining to thinking and valuing), and metaphysical (i.e. relating to one’s status as a kind or type of being in the world) (Mills 2003). Even with legal injunctions against racial discrimination in the mid-twentieth century, Mills argues that *de facto* white supremacy continues into the latter twentieth-century and twenty-first century via these other five dimensions. White supremacy thus admits of different periodisations—primarily between the *de jure* and *de facto* phases—as well as different spatialisations, with each political community within global white supremacy manifesting it in different ways. So, the racialised political system—as well as the social processes of racialisation—in existence in the United States will differ in important ways from those that exist in South Africa, Australia, Britain, France or the Netherlands (Wolfe 2015). While Mills’ project is predominantly focused on theorising global white supremacy, as well as its operations in the United States and the Caribbean, his thesis is one which not only permits, but insists, that any polity with a history of colonialism and

imperialism will be a racialised polity best characterised not merely in terms of its liberalism, socialism or capitalism, but in terms of white supremacy.

‘Whiteness’ is a concept which is intimately connected to white supremacy. Mills (2015) defines ‘whiteness’ in line with the work of scholars of critical race and critical whiteness studies, to refer to people socially categorised as white within a racialised social system (p.217). In his earlier work, Mills (1997) defines it as ‘a political commitment to white supremacy’ (pp.126-7), and argues that its framing allows us to think of those persons who are racialised as white who could nevertheless refuse to ‘consent’ to ‘Whiteness’ by ‘speak[ing] out and struggle[ing] against’ white supremacy (p.107) rather than ‘by accepting all the privileges’ that come with being racialised as white under it. Whiteness, then, points not primarily to the *people* socially categorised as white, but to the processes of categorisation through which white power and white motivated self-interest circulate so as to reinforce themselves. Whiteness is a ‘set of power relations’ (p.127). The complexity of these processes is reflected in the complexity of the concept of ‘whiteness’, which others define variously as terror and supremacy, absence, norms, cultural capital, or contingent hierarchies (Garner 2007). Roughly speaking, the shift to talk of ‘whiteness’ provides a more accessible way of picking out the multidimensionality of white supremacy beyond the merely political to facilitate analysis of its social, economic and cultural aspects.

Throughout his work, Mills emphasises the central role of the cognitive, evaluative or epistemological dimensions of the racialised political system. It is here that he coins two interconnected concepts: ‘the epistemology of ignorance’ and ‘white ignorance’. The epistemology of ignorance represents Mills’ identification of a racialised

epistemological phenomenon within the racialised political system of white supremacy whose primary function is the production of ignorance, falsehoods, and distorted framings of facts in service of the production and reproduction of white supremacy. In this ‘inverted epistemology’ (1997, p.18) truth is sacrificed in service of the continuation of white supremacy. ‘White ignorance’ names the same phenomenon, roughly speaking, but from 2007 onwards, Mills tends to use this label rather than its earlier alternative.

### ***White ignorance as a racialised social epistemological contract***

In *The Racial Contract* (1997), Mills deploys a conceptual device central to post-Enlightenment political theory—the social contract—as a way of offering us ‘x-ray vision’ (p.5) into the internal workings of global racialised political systems. Typically, social contract theory allows political philosophers to model the origins of the polity as well as justifying its political authority over citizens on the grounds of consent by rational agents. In contrast with the hypothetical contracts of Hobbes, Locke, Kant and Rawls, Mills follows first Rousseau and then Carole Pateman (1988) in analysing the structure of the polity in terms of a contract between some at the expense of others: in other words, a ‘domination contract’ (Mills 2007b). This ‘anti-contractarian contractarian’ project thus traces the origins of European and post-European polities in the existence of real-world contracts in which white Europeans entered into agreements with one another to construct polities, economies, and cultures in which darker peoples are denied full status as equal moral, political or intellectual persons (Mills 1997, 2000, 2015).

Alongside the moral and political contracts involved in traditional contract theory—the contracting of agents together to agree to abide by norms of moral conduct, as well as

agreements to abide by political norms, such as obedience to the sovereign or the adjudication of the courts or other arbiters of justice under circumstances of conflict—Mills (1997) identifies an epistemological contract where particular ‘norms and procedures’ exist for determining what counts as ‘moral and factual knowledge of the world’ (p.17). Even within the traditional formulations of the social contract, Mills argues that the epistemological dimension of the social contract requires that in order to be ‘granted full cognitive standing in the polity, the official epistemic community,’ one must ‘agree’ to this picture of human cognitive interaction with the world as depicting what is ‘correct’ or ‘objective’ (pp.17-18). To be granted full cognitive standing within an epistemic community is to be recognised as an agent capable of possessing both moral and factual knowledge of the world, according to the standards of that epistemic community.

Within the racialised political system of the Racial Contract, however, the epistemological picture is ‘more demanding’ insofar as the epistemological requirements for membership of the polity will be determined by the standards—and interests—of the dominant racial group, i.e. white people. Consequently, within the Racial Contract Mills holds that

one has an agreement to *misinterpret* the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority. (1997, p.18)

What is taken to objectively represent the world as it is, is really a picture of the world generated by a particular viewpoint within it. Signatories to the Racial Contract will be invited to agree, among other things, that there will be claims that ‘race’ denotes a meaningful biological category; that if racial discrimination occurs then it is the fault of

those whose 'race' makes their claims to entitlement to non-discriminatory treatment unjustified in virtue of lesser normative or metaphysical standing; that 'racism' denotes not a macro-level socio-structural phenomenon but an interpersonal dynamic influenced primarily by psychological or attitudinal facts about particular individuals; and that even if there were historical macro-level socio-structural forms of race-based discrimination in which people were sold, subjugated, displaced, killed, or otherwise brutalised and such activities were not only sanctioned by promoted by law, then the absence of such discriminatory laws in the present day means that racial hierarchies no longer exist; and that, given 'race's horrifying history', and that 'racism' simply *means* 'identifying persons on the basis of their race', the best course of action is a 'racial colour-blindness' where we do not 'see colour' at all. Such claims are, of course, either false or highly controversial and, at the very least, all loaded in such a way as to contribute to white benefit and non-white disadvantage.

Mills argues that under white supremacy, motivated group interest on the part of whites generates a 'cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities', resulting in 'an invented delusional world, a racial fantasyland' (1997, p.18). Mills suggests that as a general rule,

*white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization and enslavement... in no way *accidental* but *prescribed* by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity. (p.19)

Officially sanctioned reality requires, among other things, the patterned insistence on particular narratives, facts, histories, and discourses and a similarly patterned rejection,

obfuscation, denial or erasure of alternatives. Thus, under the racialised epistemology of white supremacy, as captured by the Racial Contract, the overriding epistemological impetus is one of the production and reproduction of ignorance, especially with respect to the realities of racism and the histories in which they originate.

### ***White ignorance as ideology***

Mills (2013) makes clear, in a response to Miranda Fricker (2013), who reads his account of white ignorance in terms of a cognitive tendency only on the part of white people, that white ignorance permeates the entire social system. This account offers an explanatory recasting of white ignorance into what might—following Tommie Shelby (2003)—more recognisably be called ‘white racist ideology’. It deploys frameworks familiar from Marxist analyses to describe a situation in which *dominant group ideology* dominates *insofar as* it determines which narratives about the polity circulate widely and are accepted—and reinforced—as the official and correct story of social reality. Insofar as all members of the polity are socialised into white racial ideology, even members of oppressed social groups may be prone to white ignorance. The epigraph to Mills’ book, *Radical Theory, Caribbean Reality* (2010)—an anthology containing multiple essays on Marxism and white supremacy in the Caribbean context—quotes Bob Marley’s ‘Redemption Song’ with its famous line about the ‘mental slavery’ of colonised peoples. The oppression of people of colour is mental, psychological, intellectual, emotional, and epistemological. Even while, as per standpoint theory, people of colour have a greater *interest* in being able to possess true beliefs and to eradicate false beliefs about contemporary and historical information about racism and white supremacy (Mills 1998; see also Harding 2004), the systematic promulgation of untruths and ‘unknowledgings’ that constitutes white ignorance provides

precisely the conditions to make this hard to achieve; and attempts to do this will be met with resistance, marginalisation, suspicion and surveillance.

### ***Why 'ignorance'?***

It should be clear by now that the kind of ignorance Mills is talking about is something more than a mere passive absence of knowledge, such as might occur in a situation about some piece of information one cannot yet know, such as what the future might hold. Mills directs our attention to an ignorance that is *active* and *dynamic* (2007a, p.1), one that actively produces an absence of true beliefs and the presence of false beliefs—wrongly taken as knowledge—as well those ‘conceptual frameworks’ (2013, p.38) which constitute a ‘pervasively deforming outlook’ (2015, p.217).

This type of ignorance is one which *resists* and *fights back* (2007a, p.1). Under traditional conceptualisations, ignorance result from a deficit of information—the absence of evidence, or convincing argument—and so can be eradicated by the presentation of new information. But active ignorance, especially when combined with motivated group interest, as in the case of white supremacy, is resistant to being defeated by the presentation of new information and is insensitive to countervailing evidence. Attempts to assert or promote anti-racist, decolonial knowledge at odds with the prevailing worldview commonly accepted under white ignorance will therefore result in the triggering of a range of discursive strategies whose function is to undermine, diminish, derail, or otherwise block such attempts. White ignorance can thus be understood as a *wilful ignorance*, the sort of ignorance where one should know better, and in which one’s ignorance does not absolve one of responsibility for its harmful consequences (see Moody-Adams 1994; Heffernan 2012; Mills 1997, 2003, 2007a, 2010; Applebaum 2010).

One important reason for situating Mills' analysis of ignorance within his account of white supremacy—whether in terms of the social contract or ideology—is that it presses home the point that Mills is most concerned with the operations of ignorance at the macro, systemic or structural level (Alcoff 2007). Mills (2007a) offers a specifically epistemological analysis of ignorance, drawing on Alvin Goldman's (1999) model of a veritistic social epistemology which analyses social practices of knowing in terms of their ability to produce truth over falsehood. Goldman's framework offers the materials for a systems-oriented epistemological analysis, which Mills adapts as a means of

looking at the 'spread of misinformation,' the 'distribution of error' (including the possibility of 'massive error') within the 'larger social cluster,' the 'group entity,' of whites, and the 'social practices' (some 'wholly pernicious') that encourage it. (2007a, p.16)

Mills traces the development of the naturalistic approach within epistemology innovated by W. V. O. Quine which means that '[t]he Marxist challenge thrown down a century before [can] finally be taken up' (2007a, p.14). Here, Mills' Marxist-informed political empiricism replaces Goldman's broadly liberal model of the social world with a model of the world in terms of pervasive interacting systems of group-based domination and oppression. Mills' naturalised, black radical social epistemology of ignorance cannot be divorced from the political conditions which ground social epistemological practices. Even while ignorance might be operative at the individual and group levels (Alcoff 2007), it is as a systematic phenomenon that it is most significant, impactful, and pernicious. At its root, the concern with ignorance is a concern for how socio-political epistemological processes and practices, such as denial, self-deception, obfuscation,



mystification, idealisation, erasures, operate so as to uphold domination and oppression—in other words, ways or practices of *ignoring*.

### **White ignorance in British education**

White ignorance, then, picks out a particular cognitive or epistemological phenomenon in a world structured in fundamental ways by the construction of racial categories and hierarchies within and through the European colonial imperial project. In the context of Mills' specific arguments, white ignorance is theorised either in the abstract, as a feature of racialised political systems *in general*; in the particular, such as in 2007's 'White Ignorance' with its focus on how white supremacy results in the racialisation of epistemological processes such as perceiving, remembering, or giving or receiving testimony in the United States; or in global terms, as in 2015's 'Global White Ignorance,' where Mills argues that, much as white supremacy is global in scope, so too is white ignorance. Given that for Mills, the concept of 'white ignorance' is a means of fleshing out the cognitive or epistemological dimension of white supremacy, this latter claim would seem to follow.

### ***White ignorance in Britain***

One might thus argue for the existence of white ignorance in Britain fairly straightforwardly: Where white supremacy exists, white ignorance is likely to exist. Local political systems where global systems of racialised colonial-imperial domination once played, and continue to play, a significant role are themselves likely to be racialised political systems. Since one of the ways that a racialised political system (i.e. white supremacy) operates is via the cognitive or epistemological dimension (i.e. white ignorance), then for any polity where white supremacy exists, it is likely that white

ignorance exists too. Britain is one such local polity; therefore, white ignorance is likely to exist in Britain.

Of course, this kind of logical derivation might seem to miss the point: aren't we more likely to discover whether white ignorance exists in British education empirically, rather than deriving conclusions from fairly abstract premises? Can we claim that Britain is a polity in which global systems of racialised colonial-imperial domination once played, and continue to play, a significant role? Is there evidence for the existence of white ignorance in Britain, especially in British education?

Arguably, Britain itself played an enormous role in the construction and development of that very same global racialised colonial-imperial system. The British Empire spanned the globe, and a great number of modern states are its ex-colonies: Hawaii, the United States, Canada, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Australia, Jamaica and many other small island states in the Caribbean, as well as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Israel and Palestine.

Mills (2015) offers a framework for identifying instances of the 'racial erasure' that is central to white ignorance: erasing white racism as the ideological driver of modernity; denying white supremacy as a global system or, indeed, as a system whatsoever (as opposed to 'merely' interpersonal ill-will); whitewashing white atrocity; and eliminating non-white contribution. Ample evidence can be found of all of these categories of phenomena in the British context, although I can offer only a cursory overview here.

The erasure of white racism was an essential part of the ideological basis of British Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy, such as we might find in the work of those founding fathers of social contract theory, toleration, or free speech. English philosopher John Locke was, for example, one of the shareholders in the Royal African Company, which ‘transported more Africans into slavery than any other British company in the whole history of the Atlantic slave trade’. (Olusoga 2016, p.22); John Stuart Mill wrote in *On Liberty* that the famous ‘Harm Principle,’ the basis of freedom of thought, expression, action and association for classical liberalism, ought not to extend to ‘backward states’ of ‘race[s]’ in their ‘nonage’ (Mill 1974, p.69; Mills 2008 p.202 fn. 8). So too the denial, or at least erasure of white supremacy as a systemic or structural phenomenon. As historian Kathleen Paul (1997) illustrates, the now much-discussed British immigration and citizenship policies initiated in the early twentieth-century and developed throughout the Forties, Fifties and Sixties were expressly designed to reinforce or manage racialised hierarchies, negotiating the twin demands of maintaining at least soft political power in the white settler colonies and dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, while restricting the entry of British colonial subjects from Africa, India and the Caribbean who were deemed to be “‘primitive of mind,” “backward”... and “not our own people,”” even after a universalised formal citizenship was introduced across the United Kingdom and Colonies (pp.22-23). British twentieth-century racism was perpetrated very much at the hands of state policies and systems, and not merely through interpersonal ill-will or prejudice. Similarly, examples abound of the whitewashing of white atrocity on the part of the British. As recently as 2011, the British government was forced, as the result of a series of legal cases brought by elderly members of the Masai, Kikuyu and Mau Mau tribes seeking justice for systematic brutalisation and torture at the hands of the British

in the mid-twentieth century, to admit to the existence of two hundred feet of files on British activities in Kenya at MI6's secretive Hanslope Park facility. This was despite both consistent denial of these British atrocities by then Prime Minister Gordon Brown, and the official Public Records office at Key confirming Brown's denial. As historian Ian Cobain (2016) recounts, this was just the tip of the iceberg: in preparation for the demise of the Empire and the onset of colonial independence, the British Foreign Office and its colonial agencies engaged in a decades-long project of burning, drowning, and confiscating any documentation which discussed—or even merely referred to documents which discussed—a wide range of systematic and brutal British activities during British rule. As for the elimination of non-white contribution to British life, the central thesis of historian David Olusoga's *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (2016) is that despite evidence for a continued black presence in Britain since at least Roman times, black people have been 'expunged' from mainstream narratives of British history, a 'denial and disavowal' resulting in a 'distorted or diminished vision of our national past' which is 'not just a consequence of racism, but a feature of [it]' (p.10).

### ***White ignorance in the British education system***

There is also evidence of white ignorance at work in the British education system. The same systemic erasure, denial, obfuscation, forgetting, and idealisation which characterise national narratives exist within educational curricula and other sites of educational practice.

One notable recent example is highlighted by the 'Why is my Curriculum White?' (#whitecurriculum) movement which began at University College London (UCL) in 2014 and which has since spread across British universities and schools. In November of the same year, the 'Why is my curriculum white?' collective of academics and

student scholar-activists released a video which sought to challenge the pervasive whiteness of their university experience. The #whitecurriculum movement argued that university curricula reproduce a racialised, Eurocentric worldview in which white people and their achievements are held as superior to those of people of non-European descent who are racialised as non-white. The result is that university curricula act as a vehicle for the transmission of whiteness—‘an ideology that empowers people racialised as white’ (‘Why is my Curriculum White?’ collective, 2015). Such curricula set and adjudicate one’s adherence to the intellectual conditions for the transmission and endurance of white supremacy and racism in British education and in Britain in general. The movement’s claims from the video and the various debates and events which took place across the country might be summarised as follows:

- The white curriculum excludes or marginalises black scholars. White, male (‘pale, male and stale’) scholarship constitutes the majority of compulsory material in courses in History, Medicine, Mathematics, Philosophy, Politics, Economics and other academic disciplines. There is no reflection of the significant contributions made to these fields by non-European or non-white thinkers, and where they are included for study in these courses, they are either (a) offered as supplementary material to modulate discussions between white thinkers; (b) tend to be educated in British educational institutions, and can in many cases tend to reproduce a white worldview in their analysis and concerns; or (c) are used as a foil for white scholarship as a means of ‘testing’ ideas and, ultimately, showing how non-Eurocentric perspectives fail or are otherwise not to be taken really seriously.
- The white curriculum whitewashes and erases the role of British and European colonialism and imperialism. Either colonialism and imperialism is entirely absent from disciplinary narratives or, if present, its presentation tends to be framed as a project of benevolent improvement of inferior peoples—‘savages’—who required the steady hand of British and European paternalism, study and resource extraction before they could be bequeathed ‘independence’ as ‘civilised peoples’ from British rule. Similarly, the richness and sophistication of civilizations that the British destroyed is rarely taught. The white curriculum also functions so as to erase the role of universities in imperialism, despite being described as the ‘research and development’ wing of Empire (Willinsky 1998).
- The white curriculum is both a cause and consequence of the absence of black scholars in teaching roles in university classrooms. As noted above, black people are significantly underrepresented in academic posts, even while being overrepresented in causal academic contracts. White, as opposed to black,

epistemic authority thus remains normalised in universities where not only black scholarship but black scholars themselves are absent and, where present, are forced to navigate the ‘Antarctic’ whiteness of academic disciplinary communities, practices, norms and canons.

The ‘Why is my Curriculum White?’ collective offers eight possible answers to the question of why the curriculum is white: (1) whiteness as the ‘dominant framing position’ is ‘unmarked’ and ‘invisible,’ such that what it teaches ‘hid[es] behind... universality, rationality and common-sense’; (2) a white curriculum was ‘fundamental’ to the ‘ideological project’ of capitalism which framed European economic models as ‘morally and intellectually superior,’ defining ‘progress, rationality and development’ in ways antithetical to non-European and indigenous economic systems; (3) the white curriculum is intersectional, inasmuch as it is ‘intrinsically linked to, and therefore reproduces, power and thought which is racialised as white, physiologically/physically fit, wealth-rich and heteropatriarchally/cisgenderly male’; (4) the white curriculum ‘thinks for us so we don’t have to,’ reproducing that logic of colonialism which held that the ‘colonised do not own anything—not even their own experiences.’ Instead, white commentators—anthropologists, historians, sociologists, cultural theorists, philosophers, and so on—are the only ones ‘able fully to explain Black suffering’ and the rightful inheritors of the right to produce true and objective knowledge; (5) the white curriculum is a product of the physically-rendered whiteness inherent in the built academic environment: ‘every space of learning in Britain is constructed with the resources and the labour of the peoples of the Global South and in a manner that puts [them] as subordinate’; (6) the white curriculum instrumentalises the scholarship of black scholars to create a ‘cognitive shelter’ where we are ‘guid[ed] in how to view marginalised perspectives—exactly as they are presented: as marginal.’; (7) the white curriculum erases ‘forms of knowledge production which emerge from community and

grassroots academics,’ while ‘reinforc[ing] the fallacy’ of thinking as the preserve of Europeans and that ‘while “the natives” may be able to run, fight and dance, what they could never do is think.’; and finally (8), the white curriculum is white because ‘the only way we can succeed is by reproducing whiteness—centering the “right” (i.e. white) voices and ideas to the exclusion of others.’ (‘Why is my Curriculum White’ Collective, 2015)

This central claim—that the white curriculum not only reproduces but mandates an ideological whiteness—clearly reflects many of the central claims within Mills’ analysis of white ignorance. Indeed, Mills (2007a) specifically cites school textbooks as a crucial site for the management of colonial and imperial ignorance, albeit in the context of the United States (p.30). Moreover, if we return once more to the framework for identifying white ignorance provided by Mills (2015), we can interpret the claims of the #whitecurriculum movement in similar terms: in terms of the erasure of white racism as a central modern ideology, the denial or even outright erasure of white supremacy as a global (or local) system, the whitewashing of white atrocity, and the denial of non-white contribution.

Nevertheless, one might note that the language of ‘white ignorance’ is notably absent from the claims made by the #whitecurriculum movement. Why might this be? A number of plausible reasons exist, and perhaps surprisingly, point to some of what is useful about Mills’ analysis. For one thing, an emphasis on ‘white ignorance’ may be considered by some to be a rhetorically inefficacious device for engaging with especially white audiences for whom mention of ignorance is associated with moral exculpation. Under this interpretation of white ignorance, white audiences may claim

that they did not, and could not, have known better and, as such, that their ‘white ignorance’ gets them off the hook, morally speaking, for taking responsibility for the white curriculum and the project of dismantling it. Moreover, talk of ‘white ignorance’ may obfuscate the fact that colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy and racism are forms of what is arguably white *knowledge*.

These are undoubtedly good reasons for the rhetorical or even conceptual recalcitrance to deploy Mills’ concept. However, as will hopefully be clear from the foregoing discussion, Mills’ analysis has the resources to mitigate these concerns. White ignorance is not, no matter what white people might claim, morally exculpatory. White ignorance does, however, explain how and why it is that whiteness fosters and facilitates white denial of moral or political responsibility for racial injustice, both in general and in educational contexts. Mills also makes clear that central to the phenomenon of white ignorance is the presentation of falsehoods as knowledge, guaranteed by white epistemic authority. And while not his most well-known formulation of the concept, Mills explicitly suggests that ‘white ignorance’ can and in some senses should be understood in terms of ideology, a framework which permits certain manoeuvres to be made with the concept—an emphasis on socialisation of belief in contrast with the (albeit tacitly) voluntaristic model of the social contract, properly demarcating the scope of white ignorance as pervasive enough to permeate the entire polity. Thus, white ignorance as a framework highlights those processes of *active*, *resistant* and *systematic* ignoring which will be deployed to resist efforts such as those of the #whitecurriculum collective to name them to begin with.



The #whitecurriculum movement points to important pedagogical implications of adopting this conceptual framework as part of the ongoing project to understand and dismantle white supremacy. For example, anti-racist strategies which frame racism primarily as the consequence of ‘implicit bias’ can obfuscate the structural nature and aetiology of racism and its connection to socio-political systems (see Tate and Page in this volume), and prove ineffective absent the conscientious and deliberate ‘unwhitening’ of curricula, staff demographics, institutions and pedagogical practices.

Even with the backing of overwhelming evidence, claims to the existence of racism in British education are met with resistance. Merely descriptively speaking, we can say that there exists a pervasive and systematic set of practices in which the existence of racism, and the racialised political systems which produce and constitute it, are denied, diminished, misrepresented, erased. Therefore, white ignorance exists in the British education system.

## **Conclusion**

The movement to reveal and interrogate the predominance of a #whitecurriculum in UK universities and schools can be read in terms of a movement dedicated to the identification and eradication of white ignorance. While it is not the only domain in which white ignorance operates, education plays a central role in the production and reproduction of white ignorance. Education constitutes a space in which students are led into a particular worldview—in which, to put it another way, students are offered the terms of an epistemological contract and there are consequences for refusing to be a signatory to it. Education is where people are taught what an objective and correct picture of the world looks like, as well as the methods appropriate to finding new knowledge, and applying existing knowledge to practical and intellectual problems. The

#whitecurriculum movement presses home the point that to be educated in a racialised polity is to be educated into, and in confrontation with, white ignorance. The #whitecurriculum movement refuses such an education, insisting on its decolonised alternative. Anything less is a capitulation to white supremacy.

Educating for social justice requires educating in ways that are socially just insofar as we do all that is within our power to ensure that our pedagogy actively works against reproducing the epistemological systems that foster ignorance as a route to racial injustice. But, as Mills' analysis and the above discussion illustrates, this is no easy project. Naming white ignorance and its machinations is a necessary first step in the struggle for racial justice.

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